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THE LONDON PRINTSELLERS' ASSOCIATION.

ACCORDING to the adage, "one cannot touch pitch without being defiled," and it would appear as if the developments that are being made from time to time would crystalize into another proverb, to wit:—that the man who deals in art will show stains; not that the art he deals in is not perfectly pure, but it acts as a sort of touch-stone that brings to light the original sin that is latent in the man. St. Anthony himself could never have resisted the temptations that beset the art dealer. Generally, associations of men practice virtues that they disregard as individuals, but the following letters from Mr. F. Seymour Haden to the *Pall Mall Gazette* exhibit the London Printsellers' Association in a different light:—

"In your article of June 4 you charge certain of the principal printselling firms—you were careful not to include the whole of them—with having formed themselves into an association, or ring, for the manufacture and issue on an extensive scale of sham proofs, and by means of a stamp which they parade as a certificate of genuineness, for imposing these sham proofs upon the public at the price of real ones. Of this kind of manufacture you gave two recent instances. With every word of this article, which confers a signal benefit on the public, I heartily concur. The letter of "A Printseller" in reply to it can only be accepted as a specimen of that kind of defence which it is common to set up when it is found inconvenient to look facts in the face, and which consists in calling witnesses to character. Meanwhile, by way of strengthening what you have said, permit me to forward you copy of a letter which, more than two years ago, as the representative of a body of independent engravers, I myself found it necessary to write to a prominent member of the ring in question. I regret that I have not been able to obtain the writer's consent to the publication with it of the letter to which it is an answer. Nothing, however, will be lost by this refusal, my letter, as you will see, dealing categorically with the whole subject, and disposing summarily of each point as it has been raised by the printseller. To this letter I have only to add that, pending an equitable settlement of the question it treats of, I have withdrawn the whole of my own art work—the mezzotint of 'Calais Pier' included—from the market:—

38, Hertford street, February, 26, 1882.

"I am in receipt of your letter of yesterday, written in answer to one from me of February 11, to inform you that much as I should have liked to put myself into the hands of your firm, I must not, if you expect me to submit my works to the stamp of the Printsellers' Association, think of doing so. In this letter you say, though it is observable you make no attempt to prove it, that your association is not a trade union; that it implies no combination to keep up prices; that it violates no economic principle; and that in making its members declare beforehand the maximum number of proofs which they mean to take from their plates, it consults the interests both of the artist and the publisher; and you finally add, as to the sacrifice of unstamped work (which you admit), that the associated printseller does not

embark his capital in such work because their authors, by refusing to make the 'declaration' you require, render you 'uncertain' and the public 'suspicious' as to the number of impressions which may be taken from their plates.

"To this I reply that, in my judgment the Printsellers' Association is a trade union; that it is a combination to keep up prices, and even to create factitious prices; that in hampering independent production, it does violate a very important economic principal; and that, however advantageous its operations may be to the printseller, they are disadvantageous to the public and injurious to the artist; further, that the declaration you require, and which you claim to be a protection to the public, is no protection at all, but the reverse; and, finally, that in refusing to deal in unstamped work the printseller is not animated by the distrust you suggest, or, to the best of my belief, that the public (except so far as it may be prompted by the printseller) is in the least 'suspicious' as to the value and integrity of such work.

"You say the Printsellers' Association is not a trade union. As to this, as one of its chief promoters, you are of course aware that when, in 1875, I attempted to publish the plate known as 'Calais Pier,' its publication was suddenly stopped by a secret notice served by the association on my then publisher, which warned him that in embarking in its publication he was contravening a fundamental rule of the association, and in continuing the circulation of its unstamped impressions was rendering himself liable to expulsion from the body, a notice which so frightened him that he at once broke the engagement he had taken with me and ceased to sell the work. Was not this the act of a trade union? If not, on what other ground did a confederation of tradesmen that I had never before heard of assume to interpose between me and my production, and thus interfere with my liberty as an artist? Again, among the restrictions which you impose on each other, have you not a rule which prohibits your members from giving employment even to a printer who refuses to belong to you, and are you not again and again a trade union when on the specious pretext of 'distrust and suspicion' you do your best to prevent the sale of an independent engraved work?

"Again you say your association is not a combination to keep up prices. I say it is, because in combining to stamp and issue as "proofs" impressions which it well knows are not proofs, it forces the print-buying public to pay a price for those impressions which is not represented by their true value—a price, in fact, which is altogether factitious. Nor does your present proposal to call these factitious proofs 'states' at all mend the matter, since they are no more 'states' than they are 'proofs.' If we are to believe your association, everything is a proof which a publisher affiliated to you chooses to call one, and which, for a fee, payable on each, you are ready to stamp as a proof and issue to the public as a proof at proof price! What, I would ask you, is this not a combination to keep up prices?

"Again, you say your association violates no economic principle. I say it violated a very obvious economic principle when, by interposing between me and my publication

of 'Calais Pier,' it stopped its production, and that it does the same thing when it withholds employment from a printer, however able, who conscientiously refuses to belong to it. True, on the first of these occasions, in consequence of a prompt letter to the *Times*, the association had to draw in its horns and alter its laws; and that to my knowledge, at least, one able printer is in receipt of work furtively given him by members of the association; but these instances only prove how an untenable and tyrannical principle will break down in practice, and how the strongest combination for a wrong purpose vigorously attacked in front may easily be put to the rout.

"Again, you claim for the 'declaration' you require your members to make as to the number of 'proofs' they mean to take from their plates that such declaration, since it provides for a 'limitation' of issue, is a protection to the public. But how can this possibly be when you allow your associates to take as many as they like, and when, without the least regard to the interests of the public, you sanction by the guarantee of your stamp their issue as genuine proofs? Do you think if the public knew this they would continue to buy them and pay proof prices for them as they are now doing? I think not. On the contrary, I think, their eyes once opened, they would speedily learn to regard your stamp as I do—*i. e.*, as a certificate not of value, but of worthlessness, and avoid it accordingly.

"Finally you tell me, and quite seriously, that the associated printseller does not invest his capital in unstamped work—*i. e.*, refuses to sell the comparatively few fastidious impressions which an artist jealous of his reputation may think proper to take from his plate, because he is uncertain as to their number and quality, and because the public 'accustomed to the safeguard' of your declaration and your stamp, is 'suspicious,' and will not buy them. Surely, sir, knowing as you do the real reason why the associated printseller will not sell such works, that reason being that their authors will not make the delusive declaration you require, or countenance your proceedings in any way whatever, you impose on yourself when you profess your credence in such an explanation. You do not deal in such works simply and solely because, being a trade union, you have made up your mind not to deal in them, or even to do business on equal terms with any independent printseller who undertakes their publication.

"Having thus, by a consideration as brief as possible of your own propositions, answered your letter, I will, if you please, add some reflections of my own, capable, I think, of throwing even a stronger light on the character and objects of the association which you represent. From a publication called *Year's Art*, edited, I believe, by one of your members, but whose statements on your behalf seem to me in the highest degree imprudent, I learn that the circumstances which determined the formation of your society were these: A publisher—I know not what publisher, and forbear to enquire—was discovered to be stealing a march upon his fellows by removing from exhausted engraving plates the lettering which characterized the state of "print" and reissuing impressions from such rejuvenated plates as

genuine 'proofs.' Against this proceeding you seem to have combined. But why did you combine? *Year's Art* says it was to vindicate your good name and to protect the public from so disgraceful a fraud; but I say it was because, having learned the dangerous secret of his gains, you thought it better to make a partnership with this recreant brother, and to become henceforth yourselves manufacturers and issuers of factitious proofs on the largest possible scale. As to this I find that while in 1871 you stamped 6,433 of these proofs, and issued them to the public at a value of £44,052, by 1879 your issue of them had increased to the astonishing number of 26,580, at a cost to the public of £169,024—an increase not to be accounted for by the healthy growth of any legitimate business whatever. And, again, which is still more extraordinary, that while in 1880 seven of these plates yielded 5,550 proofs, at a price to the public of £32,576, two others of them, in 1881, gave as many as 5,000, at a price to the public of £20,000! What, I repeat, if they saw them would the print-buying public think of these figures—the magic produce of your 'declarations' and your 'stamps'—and what am I and my fellow-etchers, whose impressions are to be counted by fifties, or at most hundreds, to think when you gravely tell us you cannot "invest your capital" in them or "persuade the public to buy them" because there is no 'certified limitation' to their numbers!

"Thus it would seem that a portentous change in the print trade—a change disastrous to every interest but your own, disastrous to art, disastrous to the artist, and disastrous to the public, and, if anything, still more disastrous to those fair dealers who, to their honor, have refused to join you—has resulted from the formation and action of the association of which you are a member. Disastrous to art, because, the only artists who have been found to subscribe to your conditions being foreigners and copyists, you have been driven to deal, and are actually dealing, in these foreign copies to the exclusion of independent and original English art; disastrous to the artist, because, his self-respect forbidding him to join you, you have, on an unhandsome pretext, which will not bear examination for a moment, tried to exclude him from the market; disastrous to the public, because, by guarantees which are no guarantees, you have for many years been making them pay an exceptional price for that which is not only not exceptional but not even genuine. More than this, emboldened by impunity, you have not hesitated to strike at the independence of the artist, and, by decrying his work, have sought to terrify him into an acquiescence of your proceedings. You will not succeed. You may fill your pockets at his expense, but you will not find him among the subscribers to your 'declarations' or the believers in 'your stamp.' By-and-by, too, the tide will turn. Other outlets than those you have blocked will be found for his work, and not improbably your own members, ashamed at last of the position they have drifted into, or who, like my unfortunate publisher, are bound to you by fear, will one by one abandon you."

I am, etc., etc.,

F. SEYMOUR HADEN.